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The Novelist's Spirited Path
Phyllis Ayame Whitney & The Power of the Positive

by Sarah Booth Conroy

RAGGED HILLS, VA. -- "These are my happiest years," said Phyllis Ayame Whitney, not long before her 88th birthday on Sept. 9.

"I always want to live long enough to finish the book I'm working on and see it published. But then I start another book before the previous one is in the stores, so I always have a reason to go on."

The author is celebrating her 50th year as a novelist by publishing "Woman Without a Past" (Doubleday); writing another book, "The Ebony Swan," set on Virginia's Northern Neck; and planning the research for one more, to be set in Asheville, N.C.

The indomitable Whitney researches her books through unexpected means: by hot-air balloon and hypnosis for last year's "The Singing Stones," by private plane for "The Ebony Swan" and by channeling helpful (and otherwise) spirits for "Woman Without a Past."

Two of these books are set near her house in Nelson County, the home of television's fictional Walton family. In the books, she drops the names of real places and things: the Wintergreen restaurant, the Book Gallery, the llamas raised by her neighbor up the road, and Nelly's Ford, where she drives to shop.

"Of course, I don't drive into Charlottesville," about 45 minutes away, she said. "But I do drive around here. I didn't learn to drive until I was 65 and my husband was seriously ill. He taught me, and I still hear his voice in my ear if I do the wrong thing."

To come to see her is like becoming one of her characters -- following a hand-drawn map to a place without a name; driving up winding roads, frightening at any speed; riding past architectural structures suggesting Noah's Ark; and always, watching the haze shroud the Ragged Hills holding up the vast changing sky.

The writer lives in a low house that meanders along a tall ridge and burrows into the quartz hillside. Some believe, she said -- with a "who's to say?" tone -- that in the deluge predicted by some, this place will stay high and dry. Indeed, the Monroe Institute and Multidimensional Synchronicity Through Holodynamics, both promoters of soul over substance, and others who would begin a new age have settled nearby.

Whitney was an agnostic for many years, but now, in the Ragged Hills, "I've come to believe more than I ever did when I lived in the North. There's enough going on that's not explainable in scientific terms."

On this day, the novelist wore a brown jacket trimmed with passementerie, popular in the 1940s, full-cut trousers and sturdy moccasins. "It's a long way around this deck," she said, leading the way.

The tiny woman moves quickly. In her smooth, lean face still can be seen the woman with the early-movie-star beauty of the pictures in her hallway. Her eyes are bright and sparkly.

She speaks briskly, frankly, even chirpily -- with more humor than her books. Call her Miss -- not Mrs. or Ms. -- Whitney. It's her maiden name -- "I've kept it through two marriages."

Summoning the Muse

The mystery mistress had been penciling changes on her 36th adult hardcover. She talked while she sat at the handsome reading stand (considerably larger than she) in her library-study, all glass

and books. Original art for her book covers is hung throughout the house. A poster or two announce publications.

On a low table in her workroom is a basket of crystals and stones. Her readers will be happy to know that she carries in her pocketbook a piece of turquoise her chiropractor gave her, and "I've never seen it turn green." Turning green is a bad sign, as all perusers of "The Singing Stones," know. A large hunk of quartz, much like the one dug up for the heroine's house in that novel, "was quarried right here, when they were digging the foundation."

The "Herkimer diamond," another kind of crystal, was given her by ceramist Trew Bennett, who, over tea, told Whitney how to make a sun wheel, a sort of a mystic circle, a place for meditation and enlightenment. Whitney wrote in "Rainbow in the Mist" that the heroine, whose name is Chrystal, "chose her quadrant carefully and sat down on the ground within the boundaries of sand and rocks. This quarter held earth energies for the south. The color of the basic stones was white, and the segment stood for children, soft winds, enlightenment ..." Another quadrant stood for "death and the unconscious. ... They could mean a merciful release into a happier existence."

On a side table, a small cassette player and earphones stand ever ready with Monroe Institute "HemiSync" tapes. "Getting the ideas are a struggle for me. I'm doing better now that I use the concentration tapes. More unusual ideas," Whitney said. Whenever the story slows down in her mind, she said, "I can go put the tape on, get the answer immediately and go write it." The recordings' "synthetic sounds" -- different for each ear -- make the brain's hemispheres cooperate, she said. She is so enthusiastic about the result that she has given tapes to her writer friends, who come to her as to the oracle.

She begins actual writing with a notebook -- for this book, 87 pages (her count) of research, structure and ideas. "I learned to do this," she said with satisfaction, "when I taught writing" -- at Northwestern and New York universities in the late '40s and '50s. She wrote a "Guide to Fiction Writing" a decade or so ago and an earlier one (1947) on "Writing Juvenile Stories." She uses a simple electric typewriter -- "all I need are brains and fingers."

Standing by are her 74 books (almost equally divided between adult and juvenile novels) in English and translations into 23 languages ("I could live on the foreign rights alone"). Some 40 million paperback copies of her books have been printed in the United States. All her adult hardbacks, beginning with "Quicksilver Pool" in 1955, are still in print.

Her husband, Lovell F. Jahnke, made the bookshelves for their Long Island house before he died in 1973. "I insisted on ripping these shelves out and bringing them with me," she said.

"Can you imagine? Building my first house at 84! And the first architectural commission for my grandson-in-law. I never saw the house before I moved in." She looks amazed at the thought.

Strong Women

Whitney grew up amid the fight for women's suffrage -- she was 17 years old before women in the United States could vote -- and she endows her fictional women with rights and responsibilities. They don't need to resort to the fainting couch or to concubinage. They are women who "end up in the arms of the hero, but they have to solve their own problems before they get there," as another writer, Barbara Mertz, wrote in a review for The Washington Post. Romantic suspense novels are considered the ladylike equivalent of soldier-of-fortune stories -- Drambuie instead of Scotch. "I used to do period books. I don't do that anymore. I got over it," Whitney said. "I'd much rather write about modern women. They're more interesting."

One of her books for children, "Willow Hill" (1947), took up racial intolerance. "Emerald" (1982) is about a battered wife and child. In "Feather on the Moon" (1988) a single mother's child is kidnapped.

Though Whitney's brave heroines have unfulfilled dreams and underdeveloped talents, they are shaken but not shattered.

The same might be said of her life. Whitney, one soon finds, transmutes her experiences into those of her characters. "I use anything that goes by my nose."

"About five years ago, I woke up in the middle of the night and thought, we should all move to Virginia. And we did." "We" were Whitney's daughter and her husband, their son, her granddaughter and her husband, and their two children. Her grandson-in-law, architect Joseph Celentano, designed neighboring houses for Whitney and her daughter, Georgia Pearson.

Earlier, the Pearsons had come to Ragged Hills for seminars on "brain synchronization" at Monroe Institute, a new age community and research center. Robert Monroe, the founder of the institute, is the author of "Journeys out of the Body."

The Pearsons have reason to seek innovative help. About 10 years ago their son, then a teenager, tried to commit suicide. Though he survived, his brain was damaged. He lives in an apartment on the ground floor of Whitney's house, with round-the-clock attendants and a friendly cat. His mother works with him using body/brain exercises called patterning. "He's much better," his grandmother says. "Better than we ever could have expected."

His tragedy suggested to Whitney a character and some circumstances for "Flaming Tree," her 1986 novel in which a young boy goes into a coma after an accident.

In the three books written since she moved to Virginia, she used more otherworldly experiences.

"Woman Without a Past" is set in Charleston -- before Hurricane Hugo. Whitney's story has elements of a basic childhood fantasy -- a kidnapping, an identical twin, wealthy birth parents. In it, the heroine meets a psychic who "channels" a long dead spirit to prove her heritage.

In the foreword to "The Singing Stones," Whitney offers gratitude to Lewis Price, a man in Waynesboro, Va., who hypnotized her. Price, she said, "led me through a painless regression into the past life of a woman in Colorado in the late 1880s. I have used this experience exactly as it happened to me -- except for a few fictional embellishments to carry my story."

Whitney said she is not psychic, but once she did see a strange mist, like ectoplasm, rising in the corner of her room. It flashed and the phone rang. The caller told her that her dearest friend had died.

Romance in Her Blood

"Would you like to hear the romantic story about my parents?" she asked.

Please.

Lillian Mandeville and Charles Joseph Whitney knew each other when they were young. But Lillian became an actress and married an actor. Charles went to Japan to manage hotels. When he heard of her husband's death, he sent Lillian a boat ticket and a marriage proposal. She used the ticket, accepted the offer.

Their daughter was born in Yokohama. Her mother gave her the middle name Ayame, the Japanese word for iris.

"That's why I write romantic novels," Whitney said.

The family later lived in the Philippines and China before her father died. Her mother brought the 15-year-old Phyllis back to Berkeley, Calif., and died not long after in San Antonio. Whitney went to live with an aunt in Chicago.

Her 1987 book, "Silversword," is set on Maui, Hawaii, with a mean aunt who won't tell the heroine the true story of her parents' fate.

The author began to write early in her life. She even sold a story to St. Nicholas children's magazine shortly after coming to the United States, but in her first eight years as a writer, beginning

in 1921, she sold only four stories. Whitney supported herself by working in a bookstore and as children's book editor for the Chicago Sun and the Philadelphia Inquirer.

"After I found I was a novelist," she said, "I sold every one." She married in Chicago in 1925. But her husband didn't approve of her writing. They were divorced after 19 years and Whitney and their daughter moved to the East Coast. She has said real success took 30 years. Her first novel, the juvenile book "A Place for Anne," was published in 1941.

She married again, to a Mobil Oil executive. "When my husband was alive, we went everywhere in the world. He was my business manager, and he took care of all the details."

'I Have Survived'

Whitney organizes her precious time as though it were the outline of a book, or a parsed sentence. Six days a week, the octogenarian writes from 9 a.m. to noon, takes a walk and then a nap. She eats six small meals a day.

"Nutrition is my second subject. I had everything. Near blackouts, fatigue, headaches. I had been going to doctors. If they could take it out they did."

Now she takes 86 vitamins and minerals a day and keeps "the sugar out of my diet. That's why I'm 88. I believe in antioxidants that retard aging. I can't age prematurely anymore, but they make your brain work."

At 3 p.m. she takes telephone calls and answers letters -- one a day. At 4 p.m. she's at home to scheduled visitors. They soon are aware that they should leave by 6 p.m.; if not, she politely suggests the visit is at an end.

She still has plenty of get-up-and-go. Named the 1988 Grand Master for Lifetime Achievement by the Mystery Writers of America and the 1989 Agatha winner by Malice Domestic, she reigns as a grande dame of the profession. Some 15 years ago, she realized that in the previous 16 years no women writers of mystery had received the coveted Edgar award of the Mystery Writers of America. She mounted a campaign -- writing personal letters to influential writers such as Tony Hillerman ("Coyote Waits" and other detective novels starring Jim Chee and Joe Leaphorn) and to the organization. Her letters and the writers' group Sisters-in-Crime, of which she was a founder, are credited with bringing increased attention to their gender and genre.

Whitney has a small correspondence office, across the hall from her writing room, but papers -- her large load of fan mail -- spread over two tables in the kitchen.

"I have a box on that shelf of 'stuff' -- crocheted little things and such -- a man, an architect and painter, in Arizona keeps sending me -- I suppose so that I will write back. I finally wrote and told him not to send any more things, that I have a house full of things, and he didn't -- for a year, but then he started again."

The novelist keeps her own accounts and deals with the correspondence herself. "A secretary would be too distracting. I can write a letter faster than I could dictate one."

Once a month, she meets at her daughter's house with a group that studies tapes of channeling entities believed to be from the Pleiades. On Friday nights, Whitney and family go to a restaurant and a movie in Charlottesville. "I like movies," she said. "Many of my books have been optioned but none have been filmed -- I suppose they're not what the men in Hollywood are looking for. It's their loss."

It's certainly not Phyllis Whitney's.

"I'm getting younger and stronger. ... I am naturally positive. If you think good thoughts, good things will be attracted to you. I have survived and I am glad.

"People have talents that are different. Where does the creative flow come from -- inside us or from a higher power? I don't ask any questions. I just write it down."